THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY 2006: CONCERNS AMID SATISFACTION

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This essay presents findings from a recently completed survey of Southern California residents (those living in the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura). Details of the survey can be found at: http://lewis.sppsr.ucla.edu/special/SocalSurvey/index.cfm. Public opinion surveys are based on people's subjective views, but nonetheless, can play an important role in decision making as they gather information that complements data from standard sources such as the Decennial Census and Current Population Survey. The information from the survey can help better inform elected officials and policymakers about the public's concerns and priorities, and how residents feel about their local government and their local government's performance.

While this essay focuses on problems in the region, it should be noted that Southern California is an attractive place to live. Almost three-quarters of survey respondents believe the weather is the best thing about the region, but others also mentioned amenities (both natural and cultural), and services (39%), opportunities, including educational and economic opportunities, among others (39%), and lifestyle (18%) (see Exhibit 1). Over 60 percent of survey respondents also believe that things are going well in the region as far as quality of life is concerned (see Exhibit 2). In addition, 64 percent of respondents believe things will stay the same or get better in the next twelve months, versus only 32 percent who believe things will get worse. (Residents in Orange and Ventura counties are most satisfied with quality of life, with 71 percent of residents believing things are going somewhat or very well, versus 60 percent and 63 percent for Los Angeles County and the Inland Empire, respectively). As for financial security, 71 percent of survey respondents report feeling financially secure (19% said they felt *very* secure). Despite these positives, however, residents do have some serious concerns about life in the region. One challenge in improving the quality of life in Southern California is to continue to find innovative solutions for the major problems identified by residents in the survey.

*In 2006 Southern Californians rated the top problems in the region as:*

- Transportation

- Crime

- Environment

- Economy

- Immigration and Education *(tie)*

Transportation, and specifically traffic, was by the far the most cited concern, both overall and across demographic groups. Transportation (mobility) also received the lowest possible grade on the SCAG State of the Region report card for 2005.

The Southern California Survey (SCS) also found that a majority of Southern California residents have some degree of confidence in their local government, although they have less confidence in local government's ability to solve the problems that most affect them. Whites have more confidence than other ethnic groups do. Regionally, Inland empire residents have lost considerable confidence in local government since last year. Overall, ratings of local government performance vary by issue area, but most residents rate performance as neither adequate nor inadequate but somewhere in the middle. However there is more polarization in opinion on government performance in 2006 than we found in 2005.
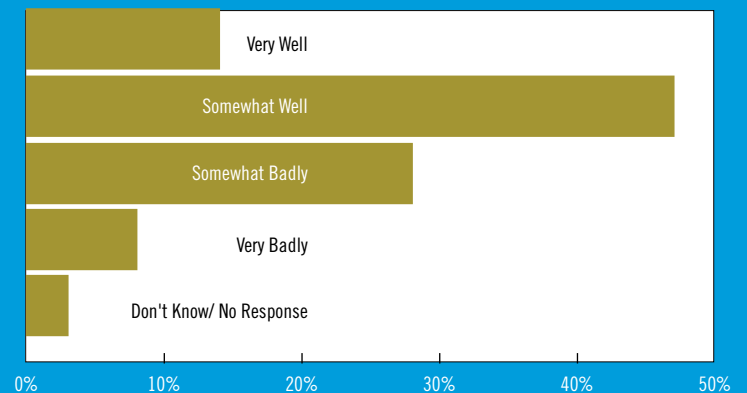
Exhibit 1

Best Things About Living In Southern California*
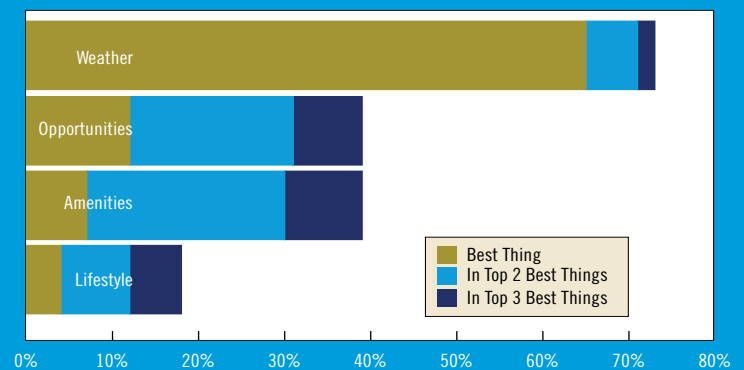
*Respondents were asked to name the three best things about living in Southern California

Exhibit 2

How are things going in Southern California?

OVERVIEW OF REGION'S MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEMS

Exhibit 3 displays the top five problems in Southern California, as well as the top five problems in the Bay Area, for comparison. Transportation, Crime, Pollution/Environment, the Economy, Immigration, and Education (which tied for the fifth place spot) are the top five problems cited by Southern California Survey respondents. Many of these problems are related to life in a large metropolitan area, so it is not surprising that the Bay Area generally shares the same concerns. Transportation is the top concern in both regions, though it ranks more highly in the Bay Area. Housing is still a top concern in the Bay Area, as it was last year, but in Southern California it was bumped off the top five list this year by Environmental concerns and Immigration. The Economy, Crime, and Education continue to be on the top five list in both regions, with crime actually moving into the second spot in the Southern California region, up from fourth place last year. We also broke down the Southern California region into three areas, Los Angeles County, the Inland Empire, and a third "other" area, Ventura/Orange county. The top three problems in these three areas were virtually the same, and the same as the top problems overall – Transportation, Crime, and the Environment (which tied with the Economy for third place in the Inland Empire).

Imperial County, which is part of the Southern California Association of Governments, but not part of the SCS sample, sits just east of San Diego County. It is a much more rural area of the region and its concerns are a bit different than those in the five county metropolitan area. While the SCS did NOT survey residents of Imperial County, survey results of attendees at the Sixth Annual Imperial Valley Economic Development Summit (2005) as to the two largest chal-

lenges for the Imperial Valley as it grows provide somewhat comparable data. (The California Center for Border and Regional Economic Studies notes that these results are not a scientific sample in any way, but they still provide insight into life in the area). The top five concerns listed included Aesthetics/beautification (30%), Good paying jobs (22%), Qualified workforce (20%), Traffic (12%), and Maintaining rural aspects of community (8%) (CCBRES Bulletin, April 2005). Not surprisingly, economic concerns rate higher than traffic in this much more rural area of the region where unemployment rates were 16% in 2005, versus about 5% or below for the rest of the five counties (State EDD data).

Exhibit 3

Top Problems in Southern California and Bay Area
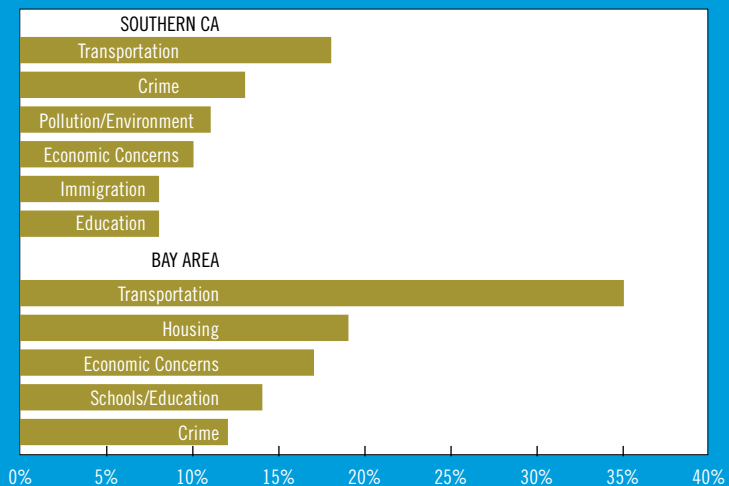
Source: Bay Area Council 2005, SCS 2006

The SCS also asked respondents about the top problems in the respondent's neighborhood as well as the most important issues facing his or her own family today. The results are displayed in Exhibit 4. Many of the problems are the same at the regional, neighborhood, and family level, although housing apparently is more of a concern for neighborhoods and families. Crime, transportation, and education are concerns at all levels. However families tend to deal more with economic problems, such as financial security, jobs, etc., than with any other issue.

Exhibit 4

Top Problems in Your Neighborhood and Your Family
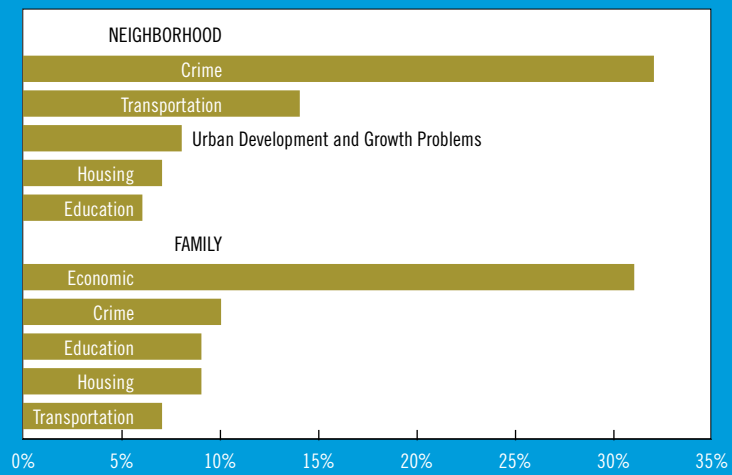
PERCEPTION OF PROBLEMS BY DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

A breakdown of the top three problems according to ethnicity, education, age, and income indicates a high degree of consistency in the perception of problems among demographic groups. There are a few slight differences though. We developed a scoring system to determine the order of importance of problems among groups. We assigned a score to each response depending on whether it was the first second or third answer. First answers received a 4, second answers a 2, and third answers a 1. Again, Transportation was ranked as a top problem, with Crime the second most important problem, and the re-

sponses were consistent among all groups except the 36-54 age group, which ranked Economic concerns second and Crime third. The only other variation was noted among third responses. Although most respondents ranked the Environment as the third most important problem, those with a BA or higher, and those making more than $40,000 per year ranked Economic concerns as the third most important problem (though the environment was ranked closely behind in the case of the top two income groups). Only those in the 18-35 age group ranked Immigration as the third top concern. The list of the top three concerns by demographic groups is displayed in Exhibit 5.

BACKGROUND ON TOP FIVE PROBLEMS

The following section provides a brief overview of the top problems identified by residents so the reader has a basic understanding of the more objective challenges facing the public and local government.

Transportation

The most overwhelming concern in the region is transportation. Although various responses related to transportation were offered, by far the most common response to the question about the region's most important problem was traffic. Although Southern California does not have the highest average commute times in the U.S., it does stand out for the level of congestion. In terms of the average hours wasted annually per traveler, Los Angeles and Orange counties have the worst congestion of all U.S. metropolitan areas. Riverside and San Bernardino tied for first out of 27 large metro areas, and Ventura tied

Exhibit 5

Most Important Problem by Demographic Groups

	Most Important Problem	Second Most Important Problem	Third Most Important Problem
BY ETHNICITY			
White	Transportation	Crime	Environment
Latino	Transportation	Crime	Environment
Other	Transportation	Crime	Environment
BY EDUCATION			
High School or Less	Transportation	Crime	Environment
Some College	Transportation	Crime	Environment
BA or Higher	Transportation	Crime	Economic
BY AGE			
18 - 35	Transportation	Crime	Immigration
36-54	Transportation	Economic	Crime
55+	Transportation	Crime	Environment
BY HH INCOME			
Less than $40,000	Transportation	Crime	Environment
$40,000 - $80,000	Transportation	Crime	Economic
$80,000+	Transportation	Crime	Economic

for seventh out of 30 medium metro areas. These delays are a major source of frustration in the region (SCS Fact Sheet #12, 2005).

Crime

Although crime was on the list of top five problems last year, this year it is the second most important concern. It also is the top issue at the neighborhood level and the second most important problem for families. According to the California Department of Justice, violent crime has actually been declining since the mid-1990s. Statewide the number of violent crimes decreased 11 percent between 1998 and 2003. The violent crime rate also decreased considerably in each of the five Southern California counties between 1994 and 2003. This has been offset somewhat by a slight increase in property crime, (which is partly due to an increase in the motor vehicle theft rate). Although statistics from the past year are not yet available at the county level, crime statistics from the city of Los Angeles up to November 2005 also indicate a continuing fall in the crime rate, down 15 percent from 2004 and down 23 percent from 2003 (LAPD, 2005). So overall the concern with crime seems to belie the statistics.

The Environment

The environment was rated as the third most important problem in the region this year. About 60 percent of these responses indicated pollution, or more specifically air pollution, as the greatest concern. (A separate question later in the survey asked respondents what they think is the most important environmental issue facing Southern California today. Over 50 percent rated air pollution as the most important environmental issue, with water pollution a distant second (9%) and traffic congestion third (8%)). Air quality in California in general has greatly improved over the past two decades. Sev-

eral dangerous air pollutants that were at harmful levels twenty years ago no longer exceed health-based standards (Air Resources Board). In Southern California, the AQMD's South Coast Air Basin Smog Trend indicates that there were only about 25 smog days that exceeded the "1-Hour Federal Ozone Standard" versus a high of over 200 days in 1977. However, reducing levels of PM10 (particulate matter) and other emissions continues to be a challenge. Finally, air toxics emitted mainly by diesel engines are of increasing concerns. Ships, trucks, and trains associated with the burgeoning freight stream from the ports through Southern California are major sources of this pollution There is still much to be done to curb air pollution in a region with over 8 million cars and trucks, as well as ports, rail, and airports.

The Economy

The economy is the fourth most important problem in the region, down from the second most important concern last year. However, it is by far the highest concern within families in the region. Over the last few years, the regional economy has been in a doldrums. The unemployment rate increased in the early 2000s, from 4.7% in 2000 to 6.1% in 2003, but the increase was not as dramatic as the increase during the early 1990s. In recent months, the Southern California unemployment rate has declined moderately. The State of California Employment Development Department Labor Market statistics indicate that the annual average unemployment rate has declined moderately in all five southern California counties from 2004 to 2005. However, in recent years real per capita income has been relatively flat. This is particularly true in the early 2000s. While the economic slowdown was moderate, the impact was

particularly hard on those at the bottom of the income ladder. The average (median) per capita income for the bottom fifth took a much larger hit than for those at the top fifth (SCS Fact Sheet #1, 2005).

Education

Education, the problem that tied for fifth most important (with immigration), is a statewide problem as well as a regional one. A recent survey on the state of education in California found that 82 percent of Californians believe the quality of education in the state is at least somewhat of a problem, and 52 percent consider it a big problem, up from 46 percent in 1998 (Public Policy Institute of California, 2005). On a more local level, education is a major issue in the city of Los Angeles where the mayor has lobbied the legislature to give him some power over the school district (Perry, 2005).

Throughout Southern California 7th graders scored lower than the national median in reading and math scores except for in Orange and Ventura counties in 2005 (where scores hovered in the 50th percentiles). These CAT 6 scores showed very slight improvements in most counties from 2003 to 2005, but no major gains. San Bernardino and Los Angeles counties also had higher dropout rates (20 % and 15 % respectively) than the state average (13 %) in 2005 (SCAG 2005 Report Card).

Immigration

As for immigration, estimates of the number of illegal immigrants in the U.S. vary widely. As of 2003 the US Citizenship and Immigration Services put the

number at 7 million, growing at rate of 500,000 annually, while the Pew Hispanic Center estimates that the number is closer 12 million today based on the Current Population Survey (Knickerbocker, 2006). California is home to more illegal immigrants than any other state in the nation, an estimated 2.4 million, although the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) notes that Arizona has become the primary border crossing area in the past few years, and now has a higher percentage of illegal immigrants per capita. The recent congressional debates over immigration have fueled concerns about immigration throughout the state. PPIC found that in their January 2006 survey only 11 percent of respondents mentioned immigration or illegal immigration as the most important issue for state leaders to address this year, but by April 2006 that percentage shot up to 27 percent, putting immigration as the most frequently cited issue (Johnson, 2006). They also found that perceptions of immigration vary by region. The March 2004 survey found that almost half of Los Angeles County residents described illegal immigration to their county as a "major problem", versus 25 percent of Central Valley residents interviewed in April 2004 (ibid).

So overall the issues identified by the public as top problems are serious issues by any measure. However, the discrepancy between the public's perception of crime and the environment (most specifically air pollution) as top problems needing to be addressed, and the objective measures that indicate significant improvements over the past fifteen years or so, is interesting. We see a couple of reasons for this gap. 1. Personal experience often trumps objective data. If you look out the window and see smog, you think the air is worse, no matter what the data indicate. Likewise, if crime in your area is low but your car is stolen, or even your neighbor's car is stolen, crime is a concern for you. 2.

Expectations and standards change. New scientific information on the harm from pollutants is a good example. We know a lot more than we did twenty years ago about how harmful various air pollution particles can be, and we have more evidence of the link to respiratory diseases in children and adults, so our standards and expectations of what clean air is have been raised, even as the air continues to improve. And finally, 3. Media coverage makes an impact, both positive and negative. Media coverage of the damaging effects of pollution helps to raise awareness of the problem, which is good. On the other hand, the need to boost network ratings may mean that crime stories are emphasized, exaggerating the extent to which crime actually happens, and making residents more fearful.

### CONFIDENCE IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA LOCAL GOVERNMENT

We should point out that perceptions of local government can differ greatly, as local governance is a fairly complex and fragmented system. Southern California's system of local government is broken up among several counties, almost two hundred cities, and numerous special districts. While California's local government structure is less complex than others nationwide (PPIC, 1998, vii), the overlapping responsibilities can make it difficult at times to know who is in charge on any particular issue. However, it is useful to know how residents perceive their local government and how they feel about its performance on the region's problems.

The SCS asked residents about their level of confidence in "your local government." The two questions were about general confidence and confidence in

local government's ability to solve the problems that most affect your own household or family. Southern California residents tend to have higher levels of general confidence in local government than in its ability to solve problems that affect them personally. About 58 percent of respondents have at least some confidence in local government generally, as opposed to the 51 percent

### Confidence in Local, State and Federal Governments
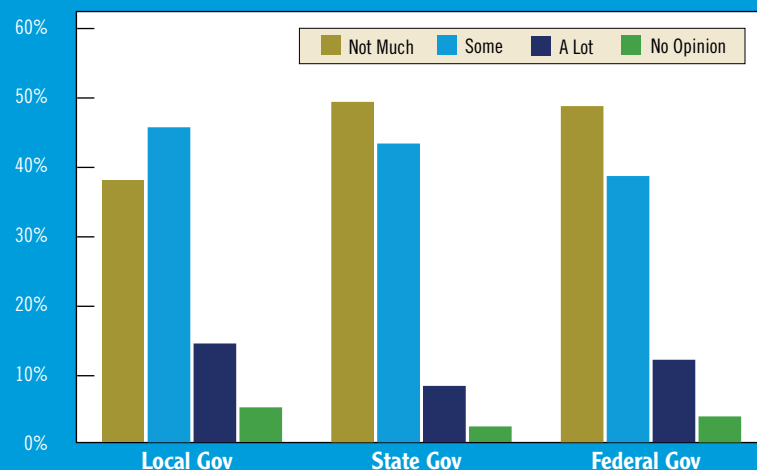
who report some degree of confidence in solving problems that affect them. Overall though, residents have more confidence in their local government than in the state or federal government. Exhibit 6 displays the percent of respondents who have confidence in each level of government. More respon-

dents indicated "not much" confidence in the state and federal government (48% and 47% respectively) than in local government (37%).

To compare confidence levels among demographic groups and in different areas in the region we calculated confidence scores for each respondent based on the responses to both of the confidence questions. Exhibit 7 displays the average confidence score by ethnicity, age, and region. Whites had higher confidence scores (.64) than Latinos (.53) or other groups (.26), but the scores for all three ethnic groups have dropped since last year. As for age, there were much higher confidence levels among residents 55 and older versus those in the 18-35 age group. While older residents averaged a confidence score of .71,

Average Confidence Score by Region, Ethnicity, Age
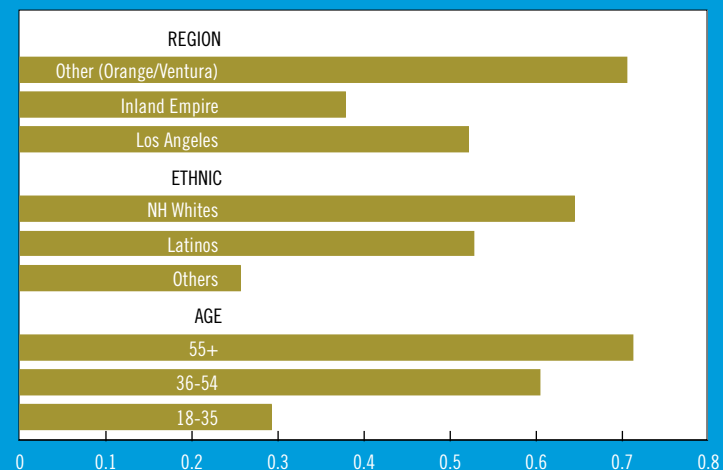
younger respondents averaged only .29. Scores also differed widely by region. While last year the Inland Empire and Other (Ventura, Orange counties) regions both had scores around .90, (much higher than Los Angeles), this year the Inland Empire confidence score dropped to .38, significantly lower than the Los Angeles region score (.52) which remained about the same as last year. For the Other region the score dropped slightly to .71.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE ON THE ISSUES

The survey also asked respondents whether the performance of Southern California's elected officials in several different issue areas has been generally inadequate, mixed, or adequate. Residents are most satisfied with elected officials' per-

Exhibit 8

Government Performance
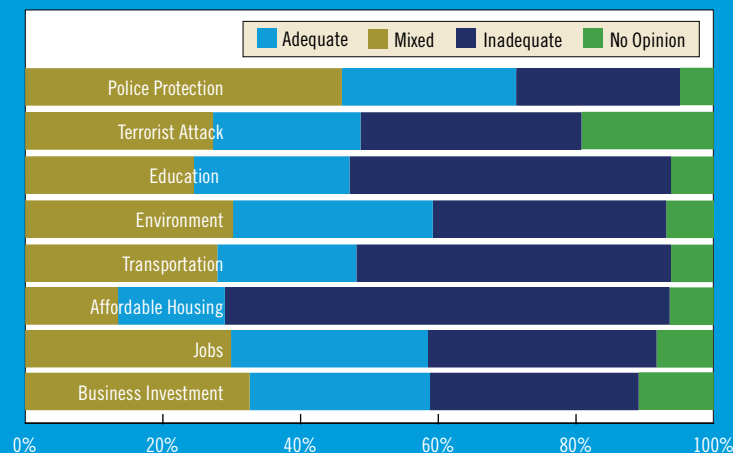
formance on police protection, with almost 50 percent of respondents indicating that local government is doing an adequate job here. There was also relative satisfaction with protecting the environment, keeping and attracting jobs, and keeping attracting business investment in the region; over 50 percent of respondents indicated that performance on these issues was adequate or mixed. Respondents were slightly less satisfied with performance on improving transportation and education, and preparing for a terrorist attack, and very dissatisfied with performance in providing affordable housing in the region (see Exhibit 8).
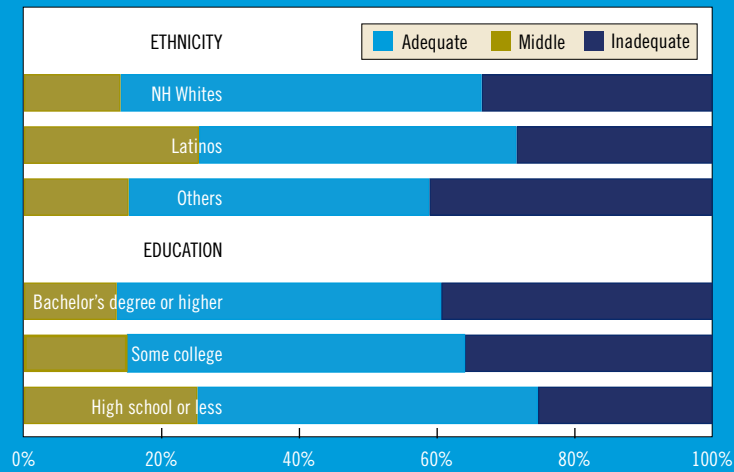
The results here indicate that residents do discriminate between the issues they consider to be the top problems in the region, and their opinion of how well local officials are handling the region's myriad problems. Affordable housing, for example, is a top problem for families and neighborhoods, (and was considered a top regional problem last year) but overall respondents see higher urgency in other problems for the region. However they also seem to agree that local officials could be doing more to ease the housing crisis. On the other hand, while convinced that crime is a major concern in the region, residents do express a higher level of approval for efforts on police protection than for other issues. So there does appear to be a distinct difference between what is seen as a top problem, and the expectations of how much can be done, or is being done, (at the local level at least), to solve that problem. In this case resident's perceptions were in line with the more objective measures of performance, as SCAG's 2005 Report Card gave the lowest grades on the same issues on which residents felt local officials could do more: Affordable Housing (D), Transportation (F) and Education (D).

GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE RATINGS BY DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

This section examines how opinions on government performance vary by demographics and geography. The differences are generally slight. The most variation we see is by education and ethnicity. Those with the lowest levels of education tend to give more "adequate" ratings and fewer "inadequate" ratings than those with higher levels of education (see Exhibit 9). As for ethnicity, Latinos are significantly more satisfied with elected officials than are whites and other ethnic groups. In fact the Latino percentage of adequate ratings increased from 18 percent last year to 25 percent this year, while for other groups the same percentage rose only two points. However all groups

displayed a rise in inadequate ratings as well. For whites and other ethnic groups, inadequate ratings rose ten percent over last year.

Looking at government performance ratings by income indicates that those in the lowest income group are more likely to give an "adequate" response than others, although they are also about equally likely to respond that government performance is "inadequate (see Exhibit 10). Here too we see increasing polarization on views of local government. Views of local government by region of southern California indicate that while last year Los Angeles area residents gave the most "inadequate" responses, this year the Inland areas proved the most dissatisfied. "Inadequate" responses jumped from 21 percent last year to 37 percent this year

Exhibit 9

Government Performance by Ethnicity and Education

Exhibit 10

Government Performance by Household Income and Region
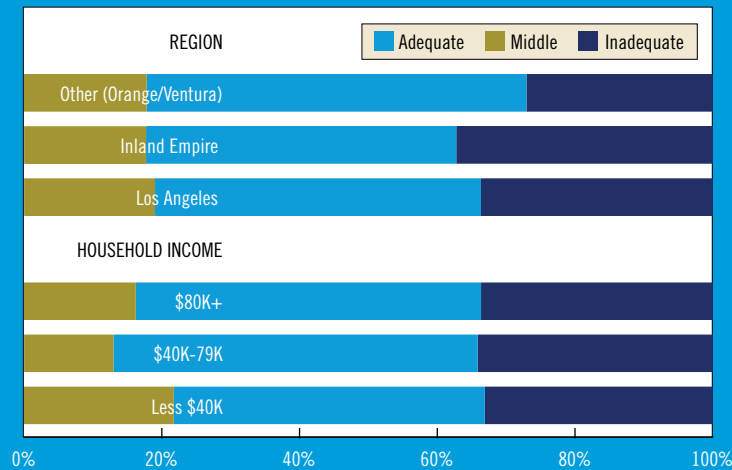
for Inland residents, while the "adequate" responses increased only 2 percent, to 18 percent. By age group we see younger respondents are most likely to give local government good marks. The 18-35 age group gave the most "adequate" responses while the 36-54 age group gave the most middle range responses and the 55 and older group were most likely to answer "inadequate."

The overall picture here is that the majority of respondents, regardless of demographic group, came out with a middle range response score to the questions about government performance, indicating that most residents lack strong opinions one way or the other However the number of middle range responses has declined significantly from last year, indicating stronger feelings about local government performance in 2006 than 2005.

CONCLUSION

Overall Southern California residents are generally content with the quality of life in the region, secure about their financial situation, and optimistic about the future, but they do have serious concerns about some of the major problems in the region. These concerns are generally in line with more objective indicators of what the top problems are in Southern California, perhaps with the exception of crime, and to some extent, air pollution. Residents also distinguish between problems that need to be solved, and problems that they feel local officials could do more to alleviate. This is an important distinction, as it acknowledges that some problems are more intractable than others, require more involvement (and money) from the state and/or federal government, or perhaps require a more comprehensive approach, including cooperation on

the part of various local governments and the state and federal government. Transportation planning and improvements, for one, involves all of these intricacies, which contribute to the difficulty in finding solutions. However, the continued consensus on transportation as the top problem over the past two years, among all groups in the region, should also serve as a reminder that local officials need to continually look for new solutions. The challenges of the top problems in the region will not be solved easily, but continued efforts can help build confidence in local government and its ability to meet these challenges.

For references in this essay please go to: http://lewis.sppsr.ucla.edu/special/ SocalSurvey/index.cfm and click on "SCAG Guest Essay"

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